

[William A. Platt]

26069 [? Life?] [Conch?] History William Jax-Platt Miss Shepherd

March 3, 1939.

William A. Platt (83)

Former Caretaker

“Keystone”

Atlantic Bch Rd.,

South Jacksonville,

Florida.

Rose Shepherd, Writer.

WILLIAM A. PLATT.

Rev. A. M. Blackford, Director of Keystone Home for Boys, said: “A quarter of a mile down to the Johnson Store on Atlantic Beach Road, then turn to the right and down the little lane in the third house you'll find him - a relict of the past, but with a mind as keen as one fifty years younger.”

“The third house” is a well kept cottage with a hospitable front porch having several rockers, the air filled with the fragrance from the wild crab-apple tree in full bloom by the gate, vines over a trellis on the right side of the walk from the lane, and a figtree to the left.

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A knock on the door brought Mrs. Platt, who replied in answer to our inquiry. "Yes, he is attending to the chickens. Come in and I'll get him; I know he'll be anxious to give you his life history and tell all about 'Keystone.'"

In a few minutes she was back, with Mr. Platt - a small sized man, frail looking, his light hair and graying moustache, his eager gray eyes showing his English lineage. He was dressed in a blue denim suit, with a black sweater, with a dark cap pulled well down on his head.

"I was born in Liverpool, England on October 15, 1855, and came with my father and mother to America in 1873. We landed in Rhode Island, where we lived for three years. We suffered terribly from the cold. You know that section of the United States is much colder than England where there is only about 17 degrees difference in the climate of winter and summer, the summer temperature ranging around 78 degrees. My mother suffered terribly from the extreme cold, and finally developed a bad case of rheumatism.

"One day in [a woonsocket?], Rhode Island newspaper I read an article about Florida, its warm climate offering a haven for those desiring to escape from the cold. We made immediate plans to leave, and on February 10, 1876 we landed in Jacksonville.

"My father and I were bricklayers. We found a brickyard at St. Nicholas which had been abandoned. We bought it, started making brick from the clay in the vicinity, and burning it in the old-fashioned way into hard and glazed bricks. We found plenty of outlet for our material right in the neighborhood.

"About this time the Florida East Coast was developing in Florida and the line from South Jacksonville to the Beach was established. I secured the contract for and built a pavilion for the Railroad?] terminus at the Beach.

"In the meantime, Mr. Harry Packer, whose father was a stockholder of the Lehigh Valley Railroad [Co?] of Philadelphia, came to this section and bought the estate across the road

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here (Keystone), which I knew as the Stowe place, for a hunting preserve. He built the house still is use there with the high gables and 'gingerbread work' around the eaves and porches. This was in 1878. On one of his annual trips down here, a few years later, he contracted pneumonia and died in the house there.

"In closing out the estate of Mr. Packer, the property was sold to Miss Mary Packer, his sister, of Mauchunk, Pennsylvania. Miss Packer was middle-aged, but a short time after she came into possession of the place, she met and married a Mr. Cummings about three 3 years her senior. Mr. Cummings, for some reason or other, always wished to appear younger than his wife, dressing in dapper fashion, and always trying to attract attention.

"Mrs. Cummings was very sincere and a devout Episcopalian. Mrs. Cummings had a secretary, a Mr. Pearsall, who attended to many of the details of her investments, for she inherited a vast fortune. Mr. Pearsall's son was through Jacksonville last year and came out here / to look me up, and we had a fine visit. He is now manager of a Steamship Line which has headquarters in the West Indies.

"Mr. Cummings was a Canadian, and not a man of wealth; his only property consisted of a small fishing camp on one of the Thousand Islands in the St. Lawrence River, at the time he married Miss Packer.

"She gave him large sums of money, however, and he became known as a developer of suburban electric railways. I remember hearing him tell of one of his contracts for placing a railway through a section around Flushing, New York. There was vehement objection by the residents on account of the noise it would cause, but he had secured the right-of-way, and one Sunday when all the villagers were in church, he had his building crew run the rails through the town, and in a short time the suburban train was in action. He was rather a good business man, leaving an estate estimated at \$600,000 when he died at the age of 79.

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“Mr. Cummings had heard of my work on the brick [pavilion?] at the Beach (Pablo, it was called then) , so one day he sent for me to do some work on the estate which had been christened “Keystone” by Mrs. Cummings for her native state - Pennsylvania, always known 4 as the ‘Keystone State’ in the Union.

“I built some flues and chimneys and repaired a fireplace, also built the brick ice-house and potato bin under the hill to the left of the road as you drive in.

“Mr. Cummings seemed pleased with my work, and when I finished he said: ‘Platt, where I come from, when a man finishes one job, he takes on another. How would you like to work for Mr. Horne, the carpenter foreman here?’

“I replied, ‘I know nothing about carpentering.’

‘that makes no difference - you'll learn.’

“So, the next morning I started laying floors under Mr. Horne's directions.

“That night Mr. Cummings came around, and he asked: ‘Horne, what kind of a carpenter did Platt make?’

‘Isn't he a carpenter?’ said Mr. Horne, ‘I did not know he was not a first class mechanic, he sure does all right.’

“Well, I did my best, and in 1889 Mr. Cummings said to me one day, ‘How would you like to come here and manage this place. You can build yourself a house right there by the gate.’

“So that was my beginning as superintendant for the Cummings' at ‘Keystone.’

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"The estate before the [Stowe?] family had it had belonged to the Buckman's who had a sawmill there on the river. It was destroyed during the War between the States, and a Federal fort was erected on the high bank, where a huge battery was erected.

"We made a bluff all over using some of the slabs from the old sawmill for bulkheading. The old Stowe home on the point was also burned during the war with all [its?] contents. It was a rather large story and a half house.

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"The Stowe title came from the Christopher's, the family of which Mr. Arthur Christopher, of Jacksonville, is a descendant. The Christopher's were owners of a vast plantation taking in this whole section known as 'st. Joseph Plantation.' They had 300 slaves.

"During the boom, Mr. Charles C. Strickland and his associates changed to name to 'san Jose,' but it was known in the early days as 'st. Joseph,' and 'st. Joe.'

"Mrs. Cummings was high tempered, dictatorial, and very hard to get along with. He was always in a fuss with one of the servants. I remember one incident of a colored servant, a girl he claimed had stolen some insignificant thing, and he routed her out and made her leave the place at 11 o'clock at night.

"Mr. Cummings was a fine woman, always calm and self-possessed even under the most trying circumstances.

"I built all the houses at 'Keystone.' and kept the [?] ones already there in repair. My salary to start was \$65.00 per month, and there were two old men on the place who were paid \$5.00 per week each. They had always lived there, one said he had been born on the place, and he lived to be 105 years of age; the other one died at 87.

"When Mr. Cummings engaged me, I told him I did not know much about farming, and he said: 'It will not be so much a matter of farming, it's mostly bookkeeping.' So, I started in,

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and with the two old men, looked after the large orange grove and gardens. There was always much danger of fire, so we kept the forested part raked clear of leaves and did not allow the dead wood to accumulate; the paths were kept open and the walks clear.

“The orange grove was a fine asset. In the seasons of 1893 we packed and sold 2,000 boxes. There were also pear trees and fig trees, but these fruits, as well as the garden production of vegetables, 6 were used for home consumption. There were always visitors at ‘Keystone’ and it took a number of servants to care for the house. During the fruit packing season we always had extra men, sometimes white, and at other times colored help. We raised strawberries also.

“During the winter of 1893 there was a heavy freeze and we lost all the oranges, and in 1896 came a harder freeze that killed the trees. It was two years afterwards before they came up from the roots. I budded these saplings to satsumas, and the trees there now are the result of this culture. We had frequent frosts then, the same as now, but only those two hard freezes.

“Mr. Cummings had frequent quarrels with the neighbors, and as the result of one of these with Mr. Armstrong who had the adjoining estate on the south, he built the recreation building within four feet of the property line, so that he would get the full benefit of the noise from the bowling alleys and the card games, which sometimes were quite hilarious and lasted far into the night. He also built a high board [partition?] fence, entirely obstructing the Armstrong's view of the beautiful St. Johns and the river traffic.

“Finally, Mrs. Cummings could no longer stand his bad temper and cruel eccentricities, and there was a separation after twenty-five years of married life. In the settlement she gave him \$20,000 to release all claims on ‘Keystone.’ and thus it passed into her hands again as sole owner.

“Immediately Mrs. Cummings raised my wages to \$70.00 per month, and I continued as superintendent until her death at the age of 73. Her body was taken back to [Mauchunk?],

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Pennsylvania, where she was buried, her funeral being held from the Episcopal church there which she had endowed. She willed the property to St. John's Parish.

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“After the separation, Mr. Cummings came down from New York and packed up his personal belongings, mostly Japanese trash, and we never saw him again.

“Mrs. Cummings was very fond of children, and the place was always open to parties and week-end visits by the younger set of St. Johns Parish. They would climb the big tree, dance, swim in the pool, and play tennis.

“There were many distinguished visitors also. I remember particularly /the Reverend Mr. and Mrs. Van [Winder?] Shields and their family came and stayed some time after the big fire of 1901, in which they had lost all their possessions.

“Judge [Van Valkenberg?] owned the adjoining place, which was inherited by a nephew, a Mr. Vorhees. He sold it to the Armstrong family. Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong died on the same day of pneumonia, a few hours apart, and were buried on the same day and in the same grave in old Evergreen Cemetery. They had no children. They always had young people about them, and adopted one, a Miss Butler, who was a niece. In the settlement of the estate, the place was purchased by Mr. St. Elmo (Chick) Acosta twenty-eight years ago. He used it first as a summer home, but has lived there continuously for the past twelve years. I did the brickwork in that old house also.

“You'll have to excuse me now, I have to go and give my chickens some green stuff.”

It was getting dark now, and I followed him through the neatly kept six-room bungalow to the back-yard chicken pens. There were two pens of beautiful white leghorns, and [Mr.?] Platt was busy throwing them vegetable refuse and shreds of lettuce as a finishing touch to their evening feed.

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“Forty-nine hens and only forty-six eggs. I'll have to check up tomorrow, there are three holding out on me,” he chuckled.

“Do, I vote? Yes, Ma'am. [When?] I first came to Jacksonville in the early 1870's, it was still in the Reconstruction period. There were only two white men in the city government, one, a Welshman, was the mayor and the other was the chief of police. All the others were negroes. The population contained 5,000 negroes, and about the same number of white persons.

“When I was twenty-one, I was allowed to vote, although I had only received my first naturalization papers, and I voted on those papers for thirteen years. As affairs were in such a [chaotic?] condition, I was afraid to say anything, and made no effort to get my final papers until later.

“In 1926, during the boom, I sold the brickyard for a good sum, and used the money to purchase this place of five acres and build my home. We have lived here since.

“My four children, two boys and a girl, were all reared at ‘Keystone.’ The youngest daughter was married five years ago to an Episcopalian Rector in Philadelphia. They are all scattered, all have done well, and all are good American citizens. My wife and I are alone, but we are happy, and enjoy our little home here. For sixty-two years I have spent my life within a radius of two miles, with ‘Keystone’ as the hub.

“Yes, I remember Villa Alexandria, as well as Mrs. Alexander Mitchell and her charity, and also her lavish entertainments. There was some misunderstanding between her and Mr. Mitchell, and they were separated. He never came to Jacksonville. Their son, A. B. Mitchell, of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was a United States senator from that state. He also had a bank in Milwaukee. It was the failure of his bank, in which the Mitchell fortune was involved, resulting finally in the foreclosure of Villa Alexandria.

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Yes, I am fond of America, and I have always enjoyed living here. I am glad I came as a young man, and I have no fear of the future of Jacksonville.

“I am a great admirer of President Roosevelt. I have never seen him, but now I am able to do a great deal of reading, so I keep up with him in the newspapers. He wants to do the right thing by everybody, especially the ‘forgotten man,’ and the under dog, and I like this in him.

“Would I vote for him having a third term? Yes, I would. America could not do better, for his policies are for what is right and honest, and in the end, will prevail. He cannot help it if there are crooked politicians - we have always had those - and they have influence over a certain class who allow others to do their thinking for them, but ‘right will prevail,’ you know.”